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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 001668

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SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY: SITREP ON SAUDI MILITARY
OPERATIONS AGAINST THE HOUTHIS, DECEMBER 23, 2009

REF: A. SANAA 2117
 1B. RIYADH 1558
 1C. RIYADH 1570
 1D. RIYADH 1547
 1E. RIYADH 1621
 1F. RIYADH 1633

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Classified By: A/DCM Lisa Carle,
1.4 (A), (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Assistant Minister of Defense Prince Khalid bin Sultan announced in a new conference yesterday (Dec. 22) that Saudi Arabia's main military operations in the Yemeni border area had ceased, that the Saudi military had full control of the border area, and that military activity was now focused on expelling remaining intruders. His statement is the first official indication that the fighting might be winding down; senior Embassy contacts in the Saudi Ministry of Defense as recently as yesterday were stressing the ongoing urgency of resupplying aircraft munitions. Prince Khalid also gave the first official accounting of Saudi casualties since early November: 73 dead, 470 wounded, and 26 missing. End Summary.

Saudi Arabia Declares Victory

2. (C) During a tour of the Saudi-Yemeni border area yesterday Prince Khaled Bin Sultan, Assistant Minister of Defense and Aviation, announced to local reporters that the Saudi military was now in full control of the border area and that its main operations had ended. "What we are doing now is bringing things to normal," he said. Saudi forces would remain in the area with a mission of removing any remaining "infiltrators." Prince Khalid also provided the first official accounting of Saudi casualties since early November: 73 dead, 470 wounded, and 26 missing. The Embassy has been hearing rumors circulating over the past two weeks that King Abdullah was increasingly upset that the military campaign had not been wrapped up. Thus political pressure may have been a factor in the timing of Prince Khalid's announcement, but given the gravity and urgency with which the Saudis viewed the challenge from the Houthis, Prince Khalid's announcement suggests that the Saudi leadership is now

convinced that sufficient punishment had been inflicted upon the Houthis to have taught them a lesson and to put an end to their border harrassments.

Is it Really Over?

13. (S/NF) The Embassy DAO was told by senior Saudi Air Force officers on December 22 that Saudi fighter aircraft had continued to launch attack against Houthi targets in recent days, sustaining the high tempo that started in the second week of November. Saudi television was airing footage as recently as December 21 showing Saudi tanks and artillery firing in the border area, and Saudi soldiers launching mortars and firing machine guns. A digest of other key press reports from recent days is below:

-- (U) Military Successes: Saudi media continue to report victories, describing in general terms how Saudi forces were "repelling attacks" or "pursuing infiltrators and inflicting heavy losses." The Dec. 21 Saudi Gazette headline boasted of 30 infiltrators killed. Al-Sharq al-Awsat quoted a military source on Dec. 21 saying that Saudi forces successfully destroyed a series of caves that the infiltrators were using to store weapons and ammunition, but could comment no further than to say that combing operations continue on the ground while F-15 and Apache aircraft continue air raids.

-- (U) Religious Support for Saudi Forces: Saudi Press Agency " 12/18/09: The Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-Sheikh, addressed Saudi forces saying, "Mujahedeen Brothers, I salute your courage" and congratulate you on your Jihad for the sake of Allah. You are facing a corrupt and astray enemy of deviant thoughts." The Mufti went on to say

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that the actions of the armed forces are the highest deeds of Islam. (Comment: This statement of support by the KSA's highest religious authority seeks to reinforce the message that the truest form of jihad is fighting to defend the nation, and to remind that those who seek to bring the nation down are deviant in their thoughts. End Comment.)

-- (U) Border Security: Arab News Online: 12/16/09: Normalcy Restored at Border, The Saudi military announced that 127,875 infiltrators and 2,206 smugglers have been arrested over the past six months on the Saudi-Yemeni border. "Saudi forces also seized a number of weapons and 14,000 rounds of ammunition. Forces foiled attempts to smuggle 30kg of gunpowder and explosives, eight sticks of dynamite and large quantities of narcotic substances in 2,140 cars." (COMMENT: The six-month time period and large number of "infiltrators" arrested make these statistics appear more closely related to routine border patrol operations than directly with the fight against the Houthis. This announcement seems intended to show strong Saudi control over the border, rather than make a statement about fighting infiltrators., End comment.)

-- (S/NF) Report from the Houthi Side: Al-Minbar (pro-Houthi website) and other Houthi sources over the past week continued to claim that U.S. and Saudi aircraft were conducting airstrikes on innocent villages. Houthi sources report 54 Yemeni deaths from a Dec. 20 Saudi air attack and 70 deaths from an attack on Dec. 13. These reports could not be verified; Yemeni officials continue to deny that any Saudi planes have strayed into Yemeni airspace. (Comment: a senior Saudi Air Force officer confirmed to the Embassy DAO that Saudi aircraft have been operating in northern Yemen with the Yemeni government's approval and facilitation.)

-- (U) On Dec. 18, Al-Minbar claimed another successful Houthi attack on a Saudi military post in Quwwa village "expelling the Saudi Army and seizing its military equipment, communication and surveillance devices and military vehicles that soldiers left behind." The statement on Al-Minbar went

on to justify the Houthi attack against the Saudi forces, explaining "We do not aim to take control over any part of the Saudi territories. However, we are forced to chase the aggressor wherever it carries out attacks against us. This comes in retaliation for its continuous aggression against civilians in the northern governorates."

Iran: Still the Bogeyman?

14. (C) The tacit cease-fire in the Saudi-Iranian war of words over the Yemen border war seems to be holding. The Embassy saw unofficial reports on the internet earlier this week that Iranian Parliament Speaker Larijani might visit Riyadh this week (the Embassy has not been able to confirm these reports.) Nonetheless, senior Saudi military and civilian officials seem to uniformly share the conviction that Iran's machinations are the only plausible explanation for why the Houthis would have engaged in a fight with the Saudis that they were bound to lose. Saudi military officials also point to the improved training and battle tactics of the Houthi, their deep reserves of weaponry, and several large stores of money discovered in Houthi areas as further compelling evidence of Iran's active support.

What's Next

15. (C) The days ahead should tell whether there is a significant stand-down in Saudi military operations. Our assessment is that the Saudi Land Forces have largely established secure positions along the troubled area of the Saudi-Yemeni border and that their shooting engagements have for the most part trailed off into patrolling and monitoring operations. Saudi air operations to patrol the border and strike Houthi targets near the border and into Yemen will likely continue for days or perhaps weeks, until the Saudis are comfortable that Yemeni government forces have the capability to suppress any Houthi activity near the border.

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Lessons from the Battlefield

16. (C) The last 50 days of Saudi-Houthi fighting have arguably been the most significant Saudi military engagements since the tribal battles that Abdulaziz that fought to establish the Saudi kingdom. The Houthi battles will be intensively studied in the months ahead, including how they revealed Saudi military shortcomings. The Saudi military, particularly the Air Force, resorted to the use of enormous firepower (despite low munitions inventories) that proved to be inadequately precise and minimally effective against fighters maneuvering and dug into rugged mountain terrain. Among questions that merit attention will be to what extent the Saudi military should restructure itself to respond to such asymmetrical threats, why the Saudis responded to the Houthi challenge as such an urgent existential threat, and whether the perceived inability or unwillingness of the U.S. to more rapidly provide emergency munitions resupply to the Saudis in their perceived hour of need will have ramifications for our military-to-military partnership. These and related issues will be the focus of forthcoming Embassy analyses.

SMITH